

Inside the Wigwam: Chicago Presidential Conventions 1860 to 1996 (2024 edition)
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The 1996 Chicago Democratic Presidential Convention
An addendum, Chapter 25 (updated)
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Facts-at-a-Glance

Event: Forty-Second Democratic National Convention

Dates: August 26-29, 1996

Location: The United Center

Chicago Mayor: Richard Michael Daley

Candidates for Nomination: William Jefferson Clinton

Presidential Nominee: William Jefferson Clinton, Arkansas

Age of nominee: 50

Number of Ballots: One

Vice Presidential Nominee: Albert Arnold Gore Jr., Tennessee

Number of Delegates: 4,289

Number Needed to Nominate: 2,145

Largest Audience: 25,000

Critical Issues: Families, children, guns, health care, education, technology, safe streets, healthy communities, abortion, prosperity and peace, re-election

Campaign Slogan: "A Bridge to the 21st Century"

Campaign song: "This Is the Moment"

The 1996 Chicago Democratic National Convention
A Bridge to the 21st Century

Introduction

AFTER AN ABSENCE OF 28 YEARS, Democrats finally returned to Chicago for their Forty-Second Democratic National Convention. Instead of the Stockyards International Auditorium, site of the contentious 1968 Convention (in "Boss" Mayor Richard Joseph Daley's famed 11th Ward), 1996 Democrats assembled in a new arena across the street from the old Chicago Stadium, where Franklin Delano Roosevelt had been nominated three times. The 1996 Democrats rallied in The United Center, the "House that Michael Jordan Built." (The Chicago

Bulls won six NBA championships in the new building.) Its construction began revitalization of an area that once had been part of Chicago's old "Skid Row."

In 1996, West Madison Street again was becoming a viable commercial and restaurant corridor, thanks in part to the beatification campaign launched by Mayor Richard Michael Daley (eldest son of Richard J., whose 1950/60s billboards had proclaimed Chicago "America's #1 Clean City.") As the Convention neared, the younger Daley's public works campaign widened and repaved streets, planted trees, installed antique street lights, and constructed concrete flower planters filled with colorful blooms down the center of Madison almost the entire three-plus miles from the Loop out west to the huge indoor athletic dome. The city also spent \$70,000 attaching "Chicago '96" stickers on 2,000 street signs. Another 2,500 red or blue "Chicago '96" banners waved on light posts and new wrought-iron fences spiffed up building entrances along the route west. Chicago spent an additional \$100,000 on public art sculptures scattered around downtown and other sites that delegates might encounter.

The political extravaganza was scheduled for August 26-29, the exact dates of the infamous 1968 event, when weather was usually a hot 82 degrees, the city extra festive and at its finest, living up to its official motto, "Urbs in Horto," "City in a Garden." The 4,329 delegates and alternates, their spouses and children, and thousands of other state and national party officials descended on the sparkling summer city by "plane, train, and automobile," ready for a gigantic party. They had good reason to feel hopeful since by August, national polls indicated that the 1996 Republican candidate, former Kansas Senator Robert Joseph Dole of Kansas, was already woefully behind President Clinton among likely voters. All spring and summer, the Clinton campaign had hit the Republican with negative ads to define him as a reactionary

curmudgeon who would take the country backward, even before Dole was officially nominated by his party in San Diego two weeks earlier in August.

The Democrats' mission this week was to give the nation a feel-good TV show of political speeches that defined their vision for the future, provide entertaining red, white, and blue hoopla, and to re-nominate their dynamic, young leader, President William Jefferson Clinton. The President was traveling to the Convention by way of an old fashion campaign train, his "21st Century Express." He was accompanied by First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton, a rising political star in her own right, who eventually became an U.S. Senator from New York and the Democracy's 2016 Presidential candidate, before losing an agonizingly tight and bitter contest to "populist" Republican businessman Donald Trump, who had never been elected to political office. The presidential duo radiated a contagious spirit of confidence and optimism to their many admirers. They also inspired distain and hatred among their political detractors. This Convention was more about personality, the President's, than about party ideology, which was muted, moderated, and mainstreamed. It did, however, focus on enduring social issues that the President and congressional Democrats wanted to solve and that they thought were important to voters.

Chicago Transformed

By 1996, the old frontier town of the 1830s was a world-class city, bold in its breathtaking, historic and modern architecture, secure in its national and global commercial connections, renowned for its natural beauty crowned by a shimmering Lake Michigan and 18 miles of public access lakefront. But its emerging reputation for relative political stability and prosperity had not been easily won. In the nearly three decades since the Democrats last

convened, Chicago had been battered by economic and social whirlwinds that affected the entire nation. It was still the "City of Broad Shoulders," as poet Carl Sandburg called it at the beginning of the industrial 20th century, but by 1996 its shoulders were carrying different burdens of an emerging global and digital world, of outsourcing, and downsizing.

Five-hundred-thousand of its workers lost their jobs during the "rust belt" years of the 1970 and 1980s when the mammoth steel mills on its South Side, that once helped forge a great city and build a nation, had fled to Japan and elsewhere in Asia. Left behind were a large unemployed and despairing workforce, their economically hard-pressed families, and a badly eroded tax base. Nearly 3,000 of the city's 7,000 factories, from steel to electronics, had shut down. Jobs also were exported over the southern border to Mexico in the wake of NAFTA, the North American Free Trade Agreement, partially negotiated by 48 year-old William M. Daley, younger brother of the Chicago mayor. (He would become President Clinton's Secretary of Commerce, then Chief of Staff, during Clinton's second term.) The unionized northern cities also bled jobs to nonunion Southern States. The entire nation was going through the throes of globalization and the first wave of the digital revolution. The Internet and email were relatively new phenomena, and global economic shifts were already underway, leaving urban decay in their wake.

During the 1970s and 1980s, many Chicago neighborhoods declined and, as a consequence, suburbanization drew away even more of the city's fearful middle-class, white and black, as well as poor urban exiles. Chicago's population declined from 3.6 million in 1970 to about 2.8 million residents in the 1990s. Back in the 1950s and 1960s, large numbers of whites fled the city, frightened by integration, driven by irrational and ancient prejudices, routed out of their homes by "panic selling" realtors who were buying low and selling back high to blacks

confined in expanding “ghettos.” The city felt like a tinder box on those hot August days and nights. Gradually, segregation weakened, slightly, after passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Fair Housing Act of 1968, and the 1983 election of Harold Washington, the city’s first African American mayor, whose uplifting personality and equitable policies calmed anxieties. But after decades of “white flight,” “red lining,” and economic collapse, social problems deepened and the gulf widened between the “two Chicagos,” one relatively rich, the other desperately poor.

Tens of thousands of Chicagoans still lived in separate ethnic enclaves, with African-Americans concentrated on the South and West Sides and ethnic whites on the North, Northwest, and Southwest Sides of the city. However, in Southwest and Southeast Sides and some neighborhoods on the West and North Sides, Chicago’s long present Latin population began to swell, almost silently, spurred by new waves of Mexican and Central American migration. In years to come, Chicago became a “Sanctuary City” protecting “undocumented” migrants seeking opportunity. And Chicago became a better place because Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, and others from the Caribbean, South and Central America arrived. Latinos were on their way to becoming the city’s largest “minority.” Eventually, most Chicagoans came to realize that these groups added great richness to a city that prided itself on its European immigrant past.

The infusion of Latin cultural and civic contributions helped defuse the lingering black/white stalemate of hostility that had boiled over in the late 1960s. Mayor Richard M. Daley followed the example of his father, and of Mayor Harold Washington, in building a winning political coalition with segments of the Hispanic, black, and white communities that gave them limited power.

By 1996, Chicago was rebounding. The national economic boom of the 1990s helped many Chicagoans. A rebuilding boom and gentrification revitalized some decayed neighborhoods across the city with sturdy new brick buildings and sleek glass and steel monoliths rising from decay and rubble, although they pushed the poor further away from affluent neighborhoods. Both poverty and unemployment rates fell for all racial and ethnic groups during the 1990s. Thousands of African Americans and Hispanics entered the American middle-class. However, poverty persisted. Nearly a third of Chicago's African Americans, 20 percent of Latinos, and 18 percent of Asian Americans struggled below the poverty line, compared to only 8 percent of Chicago whites. On average, white households earned \$49,222, while black households pulled in only \$29,086. Hispanic households reported a median income of \$36,543, and Asian households earned \$40,519.

"In the long term, you can't hold together the social fabric and community cohesion if the various components of that community are experiencing different fortunes," Illinois State Senator Barack Obama told the *Chicago Tribune* four years later when the 2000 Census figures were released, confirming these trends. In that year, the young Obama challenged former Black Panther Bobby Rush, and lost his bid for Congress, but established his credibility for future higher office. (With his brother Chris, a Washington D.C. lawyer and media consultant, this author co-wrote and co-produced Obama's electronic ads when he ran for Congress in 2000.)

By the mid-1990s, crime also was plunging across the nation. In Chicago, overall crime fell for several straight years. In 1990, the Chicago Police Department (CPD) reported a total of 314,163 crimes. By 1994, that number had fallen to 284,567. Yet tragically in 1994, murders were up 9.4 percent to a shocking 930. Sexual assaults fell by 9.8 percent to a still horrific 3,048. Robberies dipped by 3.6 percent to 33,949. Because crime was concentrated in the poorest

neighborhoods, delegates who came to Chicago in 1996 had little to fear in and around the central Loop or Magnificent Mile of North Michigan Avenue where their hotels were located. The 1996 delegates were bused safely from downtown out to The United Center. (During the 1880s, 1890s, and early 20th Century Conventions of both parties, male delegates often were lured into Chicago's downtown "Levee District" of assorted degeneracies.) By the end of 1996 Convention Week, attendees took 52,000 round-trips on CTA (Chicago Transit Authority) buses, delegate, and media shuttles.

Chicago Public Schools were gradually improving too; no longer "worst in the nation" as President George H.W. Bush's Secretary of Education William J. Bennett had called them. Mayor Richard M. Daley advanced some of the plans and progress that resulted from Mayor Washington/Sawyer's historic 1987/88 "Education Summit." That Summit brought together educators, foundations, community groups, the Chicago Teacher Union, and corporate leaders to finally start reform of city schools. Its recommendations became legislation. Steep school declines were reversed or at least stabilized.

Then in 1989, Richard M. Daley became mayor and took responsibility for how schools performed, something many previous mayors had avoided. His representatives in the Illinois General Assembly passed legislation that gave him new powers and his team built several multi-million dollar selective enrollment schools to help hold onto the middle class. Chicago teachers recommitted. That was one reason Clinton admired his host. (By the time the 2024 Democratic Convention returned after another 28 years, Chicago boasted some of the very top public schools in the nation, while others were left behind.) President Clinton, like his Republican predecessor, George H.W. Bush, declared himself an "Education President" and pushed "Goals 2000" to upgrade the nation's schools. (Few were reached.)

Not everyone was impressed by Chicago's Convention overhaul. Congressman Bobby Rush told the *Chicago Tribune*, "I would rather see a real Chicago transmitted to the nation, as opposed to a Chicago that's only clean in the front room, and the rest of the house is deplorable, filthy, and broken down."

Convention Preparation

Chicago's political and corporate leaders promised \$32 million to land the Convention. (Chicago '96 ended up raising \$12 million from local government, \$12 million from businesses, \$3 million in donated services like the 200 cars lent by General Motors and 2,000 photocopiers from Xerox Corporation, plus \$9 million in tax-deductible donations.) Business leaders calculated Convention goers would spend up to \$100 million. They always had been Chicago boosters. U.S. taxpayers contributed another \$12 million for each party Convention. The city's famous political "clout" was also at work in bringing the 1996 Convention "home." Although raised in suburban Park Ridge, Illinois, Chicago was birthplace of the First Lady and a favorite city of President Bill Clinton himself. Mayor Daley's former campaign manager, David Wilhelm, a Chicago resident from Ohio, had served as Chairman of the Democratic National Committee (DNC) and as President Clinton's 1992 campaign chief. William M. Daley, the mayor's brother was co-chair of "Chicago '96," the local Convention committee. State Democratic chair Gary L. LaPaille had been working to bring the Convention to Chicago since 1991.

The official Convention committee included 73 corporate sponsors ranging from Abbott Laboratories, Allstate Insurance Company, Lockheed Martin, and the McDonald's Corporation to Walgreens Co. and the Xerox Corporation. Some contributed \$100,000 to the event. More than 7,000 Chicagoland volunteers were trained to assist the 35,000 guests who would stay in

17,000 Chicago hotel rooms. “The entire city is behind the Convention,” Ameritech CEO and “Chicago ’96” co-chair Richard Notebaert told *Chicago Sun-Times* political reporter Steve Neal. Democrats had nothing to fear in holding their national celebration in the new Chicago “Wigwam.” 1996 was not 1968.

Meanwhile, Richard M. Daley, who by 1996 had been handily reelected by the people of Chicago (he was elected a total of six times, and served longer than any other Chicago mayor) and elected by his peers as head of the U.S. Conference of Mayors, kept a low profile and strived for civic improvements to show off the city. He hoped to close the book on 1968. His police superintendent, Matt Rodriguez, promised that demonstrators, who had fought with and been attacked by police during the turbulent 1968 Convention, would be given space and time to protest without interference. A total of 2,800 Chicago police officers were assigned to keep order. As it turned out, they had little to keep them busy. By the Convention’s end, only 48 protestors had been arrested. An untold number of plainclothes FBI and other federal agents hovered about. So did helicopters. Some delegates complained that there was “almost one security person for every delegate.” Delegates and those with Convention credentials entered through barricaded streets patrolled by squadrons of action-ready Chicago police, and at the arena through metal detectors, past bomb-sniffing dogs. Lines to get into the '96 Wigwam were long and slow.

Political Positioning

The 1996 “Democracy,” as the party was popularly called until circa 1932, gathered to re-nominate an unopposed President Bill Clinton and his Vice President Al Gore, who had swept through the State primaries. Clinton won national office in 1992, following 12 years of

Republican Presidents Reagan and Bush. In 1996, he was the first Democrat to win nomination without opposition since Lyndon Baines Johnson in 1964, in the wake of President Kennedy's assassination, (and, eventually, the first to win two terms since FDR). His Vice President, Albert Gore, earned a reputation as a thinker and was positioning himself for a run at the presidency in 2000.

Clinton was viewed as a caring but sometimes insincere, sometimes arrogant charmer, a brilliant policy wonk. He had united the party, attracted Independent voters, and won some Southern States (Georgia, Louisiana, Arkansas, Tennessee, and Kentucky). Though ruthlessly pilloried by his opponents from his first months in office, the President withstood all attacks and shifted from pushing comprehensive change to more moderate proposals and programs. He also passed a tax hike to try to balance the federal budget, something Republicans always talked about but had not done. Ironically, that fiscally-sound move led, in part, to a disastrous 1994 mid-term election, the "Republican Revolution" led by Newt Gingrich, who became an antagonistic Speaker of the House. The House of Representatives and the U.S. Senate turned over to Republican control for the first time since President Eisenhower. Many Democrats blamed Clinton, but by the time of the Convention, he was back in control of his party and the national narrative.

Clinton was the master of "triangulation," finding the middle ground on the old ideological issues. He no longer tried to pass grandiose legislation such as his first term failed health care reform bill. Instead, he concentrated on more modest goals that could draw some Republican common ground. He also out-dueled Gingrich during two government shutdowns. Voters blamed Republicans for the deadlocks. Clinton's goals for his second term may have been "modest." But many of his opponents thought it was all slight-of-hand. "There's no problem that

Bill Clinton doesn't think there is a government program to solve," quipped Republican National Committee Chairman Haley Barbour of Mississippi. Republicans thought the President's declaration that "the era of big government is over" was just a big bluff.

At first, President Clinton seemed politically vulnerable. Opponents called him "Slick Willie" and attacked his character and honesty. Under these conditions, Clinton showed his considerable skills as a conciliator and a fighter, standing firm on his principles of "protecting Medicare and Social Security, fighting for education, the environment, and equal opportunity" as well as "family values" that in recent years had been the primary province of Republican campaigners. In adversity, Clinton regained control of his storyline and with a robust economic engine behind him (the Clinton stock market outpaced the Reagan market of the 1980s), the President won steady favor with voters, enough to put him ahead of potential opponents in 1996. Despite all the controversy and "scandals," a CNN poll found that 64 percent of voters thought his first term was a success.

Republican Convention

Senate Majority Leader Bob Dole, at age 73, was considerably older than the President, who turned 50 a week before his Convention. With his victory in the California Republican primary, Dole won enough delegates to become the Republican nominee. The manager of the Republican Convention in San Diego was party operative Paul Manafort, who would come to some prominence during the Trump presidency, while former and future Secretary of Defense Donald H. Rumsfeld, once a suburban Chicago Congressman, was named Dole's national chairman.

The Republican Convention was bolstered with speeches by the popular General Colin Powell and greetings from former Presidents George H. W. Bush and Gerald Ford. New York's U.S. Representative Susan Molinari delivered its Keynote Address. Nancy Reagan and Dole's widely-admired wife Elizabeth earned rave reviews. Dole avoided a disastrous Convention confrontation between conservative and moderate delegates when his team negotiated an anti-abortion platform plank that still left room for tolerance for others to make their own choice, and by giving some "pro-choice" speakers time on the podium.

In his nominating speech, Arizona Senator John S. McCain called Dole "a man of honor, a man of firm purpose, and deep commitment to his country's cause....Others may offer you sound bites and showmanship. But Bob Dole offers you leadership, leadership evident in the stature of a man who risked his life for love of country and considers service to be his American honor." McCain was clearly taking a swipe at President Clinton who many Republicans considered a 1968 "draft dodger." Dole had been seriously wounded in the invasion of Italy during World War II and still carried some damage, including a paralyzed arm. McCain said he favored Dole "...because this nation deserves better than the aimless direction we have endured for four years." Dole proposed a 15 percent across-the-board tax cut and a \$500 per-child tax credit. He also attacked the President for collecting FBI files on hundreds of Republicans, the latest in a string of White House scandals. Journalist Robert Novak, often a Dole critic, gave the candidate a "B+" for his acceptance speech, which showed Dole was "strong and often eloquent." The "news-free zone" Republican Convention was, admittedly "feel-good" entertainment... "what the people want," explained former President Reagan's advisor Michael Deaver. But a bitter post-Convention campaign loomed on the horizon after Labor Day, the traditional starting line. Both parties were already in high gear.

Confirmation Convention

The 1996 Chicago Convention would be nothing like the famous 1896 “Cross of Gold” gathering in Chicago’s first Coliseum down on 63rd Street and S. Harper Avenue. Then, half the nation cried out for economic relief from its deepest economic depression so far when people actually starved to death in the streets of its cities and in the county-side, uncounted. But as with William Jennings Bryan 100 years earlier, this Convention would hear from a gifted speaker in William Jefferson Clinton. Antagonistic national and international issues that once divided the Democrat party were absent from this Convention. The agenda promised a made-for-television entertainment extravaganza produced by Hollywood veteran Gary Smith, winner of 20 Emmy awards.

The 1996 Convention, like most re-nomination Conventions, would be long on pageantry, flag waving, funny hats, humorous buttons, colorful signs, wacky costumes, empty rhetoric, and short on real political drama. Rather than a re-nominating Convention, the event was more correctly called a confirmation Convention, ratifying the decision of Democrat primary voters who overwhelmingly endorsed their sitting President. (Since reforms after the 1968 Conventions, primary voters, not party bosses, made the decision on who would be the parties’ presidential candidates.) Once again, the speeches promised to redefine the mission of the Democrat Party in an attempt to convince another generation of weary voters, who had just repudiated it two years earlier, why they should elect new Democrats to Congress and re-elect Clinton and Gore for "four more years." In 1996, the Democracy was ready to offer the nation a new, “moderate,” “family friendly” agenda for the fast approaching millennium, a “Bridge to the 21st Century.”

Some voters were skeptical. “The Democrats wanted to portray themselves as populist, the party of the people,” Paul Hendrie, Center for Responsive Politics, told the *Hartford Courant*. “And yet, they are catering to the same corporate interests [as the Republicans].” These “special interest” groups were paying for much of the Convention, related events, and parties, such as lake and river cruises, posh hotel suites flowing with liquor, stocked with beef tenderloin, pate, and other delicacies. Most receptions were underwritten by lobbying groups ranging from oil giants, healthcare providers, telecommunications giants, gambling interests, and big unions to waste disposal companies. The CEOs of the 73 companies that donated \$100,000 or more were named honorary vice chairmen of the Convention.

Each day’s Convention program featured a string of speakers who often seemed repetitive and tedious at times, but who wanted their moment in the national spotlight. All reinforced central Clinton themes. No orators were called up from the floor by popular demand as in the early Conventions. Everything was pre-planned by the Clinton re-election committee, the Democrat National Committee, and the White House. Lacking was the conflict, debate, drama of the early years, even during early TV years, when something unexpected might happen. None-the-less, more than 15,000 radio, TV, and print journalists from around the world were covering the event, including local outlets. Media members outnumbered delegates four-to-one.

NBC's news anchor Tom Brokaw reflected, “In the old days, there was always a sense something surprising might happen. That doesn't happen anymore. The parties have drained all the hot blood from the arteries of these delegates. They’re lifeless. They don't want to risk doing something that would damage their chances in the fall.” Conflict had been the story in 1968, when Richard M. Nixon was able to use the Chicago Convention riots in his campaign against Democratic nominee Hubert Horatio Humphrey, who lost time trying to unify his party that was

deeply divided leaving the city. Although he almost caught up, HHH only won 42.7 percent of the vote to Nixon's 43.4 percent, with segregationist George Wallace drawing 13.5 percent. CBS anchor Dan Rather predicted, "This is the last hurrah. I suspect that we won't be back in 2000 in the same way." Columnist George W. Will disagreed. Writing in *Newsweek*, he argued, "The face a party presents through a scripted Convention reveals its mind, and thus is news."

The 1996 Convention was designed to be an entertaining infomercial aimed at updating the party faithful across the country who were watching, first on cable then on the networks, and to reassure or convert Independent voters, who in the mid-term election of 1994 helped the Republicans sweep into power in both houses of Congress for the first time in 40 years. Southern and blue collar Democrats also were switching parties in alarming numbers, at odds with their old party over a variety of social issues. Yet, the 1996 Convention too would be shaken with its own shocking, unanticipated surprise.

Warm Up

On the Saturday before the Convention, President Clinton, still in Washington, signed "a flurry" of initiatives to kick off his re-election bid. One cracked down on tobacco sales and advertising to teens and children. Others established a National FBI sex offender registry, increased the minimum wage, and allowed workers to take their health insurance with them if they changed jobs. Earlier August, Clinton also had "reformed" the welfare system (after twice vetoing stricter Republican welfare reform plans). Many Democrats were angry about that but feigned party unity. Republican Bob Dole, campaigning at a picnic in suburban Palos Park outside of Chicago accused Clinton of stealing the sex offender registry idea from the 1992

Republican Platform. Dole also raged that a new poll found teen drug use was up 105 percent under Clinton. “This is nothing short of a national tragedy...a national disgrace.”

The pre-Convention weekend was packed with events such as an Aretha Franklin and Chicago jazz great Ramsey Lewis concert in Grant Park. Chicago’s annual Air and Water Show along the lakefront drew tens of thousands of spectators. An evening gala at Navy Pier attracted 15,000 journalists. For the first time, Convention news and interviews also were distributed through the World Wide Web, which was launched in 1988 and by 1996 had 10 million users, some of whom watched the Convention online. Veterans of the 1968 demonstrations also sold tickets for a “Return to Chicago 1968-1996” concert featuring Crosby, Stills & Nash, Bonnie Raitt, 1968 protest leader Tom Hayden, novelist Norman Mailer, and others at McCormick Place. By 1996, free concerts of the ‘60s were as rare as bellbottoms.

Vice President Gore arrived in the Windy City for a pre-Convention rally in Grant Park. (Chicago was called the “Windy City” by the *New York Sun*, not because of wild winds off of Lake Michigan, but because of the politicians and business leaders’ windy boosterism that landed the 1893 World’s Fair.) To quell party grumbling, Gore hinted that the President would use the new line-item veto in his second term to kill parts of the welfare reform bill that progressive Democrats found most objectionable. (The bill cut \$55 billion over six years in assistance to thousands of impoverished mothers and children. New York Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan called it the “worst piece of legislation since Reconstruction.”) “I’m confident of victory,” Gore roared. “The American people are not buying what the other party is offering.” Indeed, a poll released over the weekend showed Clinton/Gore with 47 percent of the projected vote to Dole/Kemp at 40 percent, and 1992 spoiler, Reform Party candidate Ross Perot at 7 percent. Three quarters of those polled supported Clinton’s new tobacco regulations, although

the Sunday pre-Convention headline of the *Louisville Courier-Journal* warned, “Tobacco Burdens Clinton in Kentucky.”

Convention Day One

The first session of the Forty-Second Quadrennial Democratic National Convention was called to order by Donald L. Fowler of South Carolina, Chair of the Democratic National Committee (DNC) and Temporary Chair of the 1996 Convention, on Monday, August 26 at 4:00 p.m. Despite Convention delegate selection reforms, African Americans only made up 16 percent of voting delegates, 7 percent was Hispanic, 2.2 percent Asian American, while 62 percent was white. The youngest delegate was 17-years-old, the oldest 93. Women made up half of the delegates as stipulated by party reform rules enacted after the 1968 Convention, 27 percent were union members, and for 58 percent, this was their first Convention.

Father Jack Wall of Old Saint Patrick’s Catholic Church in Chicago delivered the Invocation. “We began as a small Nation with a large vision. Help us not become a large Nation with a small vision.” The 1996 Convention was carefully scripted for television. Each stump speaker, and there were 198 of them over the four days, was assigned a specific role to inform voters in short, tight speeches of only five minutes or less about what the Democratic Party had been doing for the past four years and what it intended to do the next four. Teleprompter-read speeches were crafted in vague, politically pleasing terms that revolved around helping families, children, people in need, telling inspiring personal stories, and getting ready for the next century.

Leading the afternoon reports was State Representative Bill Purcell of Tennessee, speaking on behalf of 3,819 Democratic state legislators. He stood on a hydraulic lectern that rose and fell beneath the stage floor as needed. He was followed by Doris Ward of California on

behalf of Democratic county officials. She outlined their work on the nitty gritty issues of healthcare, transportation, highway safety, repairs and upgrades, and public safety, issues closest to the voters. She added, "... Americans will never, never accept the lower standards of the Republican Party in protecting Americans from assault weapons and handguns." She turned out to be wrong.

Councilman Myron Lowery of Memphis reported on municipal officials. Martha Love of Wisconsin, DNC Vice Chair, proclaimed, "As an African American, I know how far we must go, not only to erase the legacy of slavery and bigotry, but to make every American's heritage a matter of pride." African American women were playing a key role in the emerging 21st Century Democrat Party. James J. Brady of Louisiana, President of the Association of State Democratic Chairs, declared, "Bill Clinton and Al Gore have us back on the right track. We now have the opportunity and the responsibility to see that they can continue to move this country forward."

A video of President Clinton flashed onto the huge video wall beneath a wavy, molded plastic, red, white, and blue banner with the DNC logo looming above the 1,700 square foot stage. The arena was wired with 500 miles of cable connected to computers and video screens by Ameritech. Delegates had access to 8,000 phones on the Convention floor. The one million square foot interior of arena featured 54 skyboxes, 500 television sets, and 562 desks for print journalists.

The days of the simple front stage for stump speakers at a microphones surrounded by a throng of sweaty supporters were long gone. So was the idea that a candidate should not be seen anywhere near his party's Convention as was the case in the 19th Century, because viewing the Convention deal-making was "beneath the dignity of the presidency."

Clinton was broadcast to the Chicago Convention live from his "21st Century Express," the bunting-covered campaign train he rode from Washington D.C. through Republican territory in Ohio and Michigan to Michigan City, Indiana, before helicoptering to Chicago in time to deliver his Acceptance Speech. Also on board with the President and First Lady was their 16-year-old daughter Chelsea, coming out in public view, Vice President Gore and his wife Tipper, aides and security. The train evoked memories of Lincoln's reverse ride to Washington from Springfield, Illinois, in 1861 to take the oath of office before a Civil War scarred the Nation. Clinton drew big crowds as large as 30,000 at designated stops and smaller groups of spectators along his route, ordinary Americans who came out to see their President. His opponent derided Clinton's train as the "Status Quo Express."

"Under the current law," the President lamented to the Convention crowd, "thousands of people, even those who have wielded weapons in their assaults that were convicted of misdemeanors, can still buy handguns with potentially deadly consequences....If you are a convicted felon, you shouldn't have one. If you're a fugitive from the law, you shouldn't have a gun. If you're stalking or harassing women or children, you shouldn't have a gun and if you commit an act of violence against your spouse and your child you shouldn't have a gun." Clinton was a great explainer and simplifier of complex issues. His plea elicited cheers, but ultimately, little action. A musical interlude followed.

Congressman Steny Hoyer of Maryland, the Convention Parliamentarian, spoke next. "Today we begin our quest in earnest to re-elect Bill Clinton and to bring back to the Congress of the United States, a Democratic majority." The President's current agenda was paralyzed by a hostile Congress led by firebrand conservative, Speaker-of-the-House Newt Gingrich, although after the November election Gingrich hinted he might cooperate on some issues during Clinton's

second term. Hoyer was followed by the traditional presentation of the Credentials Committee Report by Superintendent Delaine Eastin of California and Albuquerque Mayor Martin J. Chavez. He declared, "Diversity and inclusion, mutual respect and celebration of differences is the air we Democrats breathe." Unlike Conventions of earlier years, the report was "a harmonious one," with only one challenge, withdrawn. The contested Louisiana delegates fairly won by extremist Lyndon LaRouche had been thrown out before the Convention began. DNC chair Don Fowler declared LaRouche was not a "bona fide Democrat." A chorus of ayes confirmed the re-nomination Convention's unanimity.

The Rules Committee Report was then submitted by Co-Chairs Anne Mackenzie of Florida and Philadelphia Mayor Edward G. Rendell. He applauded President Clinton for "the extraordinary feat of reducing the national deficit by 60 percent, stopping 60,000 felons, fugitives, and stalkers from buying guns through the Brady Act, reducing the welfare rolls by over 1.6 million Americans, lowering teen pregnancy and crime rates, and getting the economy moving again by creating over 10 million new jobs and by reducing inflation and interest rates to the lowest point in two decades."

Rendell also nominated as Honorary Chair of the Convention, Mrs. Alma Brown, wife of the late Ronald H. Brown, once National Urban League General Counsel, former Chair of the DNC, and Clinton's Secretary of Commerce, who tragically perished with 34 others in a plane crash while on a trade mission in Croatia. In a later video, President Clinton confided that Ron Brown was "always optimistic, always believed that good things would happen if you just worked at it and stayed in good humor." Brown's wife added, "His experience in Harlem growing up (in the famed Hotel Theresa) gave him a strong sense of self and helped in shaping him as a man."

Rendell also nominated four Vice Chairs for the Convention including U.S. Senator Carol Moseley Braun of Illinois, the first African American woman elected to that body. (She had been a party rising star, but currently was embroiled in a controversy over her visit to Nigerian dictator and Human Rights abuser General Sani Abacha that would cost her re-election.) Senator John Breaux of Louisiana, Albuquerque Mayor Marty Chavez, and Congresswoman Nancy Pelosi of California joined Mosely Braun as Vice Chairs.

Then the music blared again with the song and dance that came to represent the 1996 fun-loving Democrats. "The Macarena" played loudly over the sports arena's loudspeakers. (Right hand out, left hand out, right palm up, left palm up, and so on.) Delegates danced in the aisles to the infectious #1 Billboard Hot 100 Hit. Iconic photo memories of the 1996 Democratic Convention featured Hillary Clinton, Tipper Gore, and other notable party stars frolicking along with the sexy Latin Miami club song, remixed by the Bayside Boys. The whole arena happily danced often during those care-free, air-conditioned days of August in Chicago. The high energy song helped project a robust, multicultural image of Clinton's party. The peace and prosperity Democrats seemed to have little to worry about come November.

Once the Rules were established and the music subsided, the Convention heard a long line of afternoon and early evening speakers, who were informative, but time-slot-formatted and whose text had been approved by the DNC. (Every speech was sanctioned or altered, then practiced with a teleprompter in room SL 56 in the arena's basement. Nothing was spontaneous.) The ever-churning crowd of delegates and visitors paid partial attention to Louisville Mayor Jerry Abramson representing the Democratic Conference of Mayors, West Virginia Governor Gaston Caperton, representing the Democratic Governors' Association, and Congressman Martin Frost of Texas, representing the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee.

Future presidential hopeful Senator J. Robert Kerrey of Nebraska, speaking on behalf of the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee, rhetorically queried, "Do you want as Chairman of the Armed Services Committee, Strom Thurmond, who wants to build..." Kerrey's voice was drowned out by boos. "...a wasteful, unworkable multi-billion-dollar Star Wars system that's even opposed by the Joint Chiefs of Staff?" (Thurmond, once a Democrat, ran as the State's Rights candidate for President in 1948 against President Truman and his historic Civil Rights agenda and actions.) Despite politics and treaties, the Pentagon continued to spend billions of dollars to create anti-missile defense systems, trying to protect defenseless U.S. cities from nuclear attack, still a significant danger. Nowhere near as much spending went to trying to rid the world of the nuclear threat.

Little Rock Mayor Lottie H. Shackelford, Vice Chair of the Democratic National Committee, was followed by R. Scott Pastrick of Maryland, Treasurer of the DNC, and Marvin Rosen of Florida, DNC Finance Chair. Kathleen M. Vick of Louisiana, DNC and Convention Secretary, called the official Roll Call of the States. Every delegation had its own high-tech communication panel to express its sentiment, when called upon, which was not often. Delegations controlled more communications power than in any previous Convention, thanks to Ameritech. (Before electric amplification, the original Conventions used "shouters" who relayed the speaker's words to those too far away to hear.) But the 1996 delegates had little to say, except that they supported Clinton and loved dancing the Macarena.

Unlike earlier years, 1996 delegates also did not try to disrupt or manipulate the scripted schedule with long orations on the virtues of their home State. All 50 States, 14 Territories, and "Democrats Abroad" were present and reported their delegate number, Alaska, 19 Convention votes, Virgin Islands, four. "I'm happy to report that we have a total delegate vote of 4,289 ready-

to-go Democrats." Vick's declaration was met with strong applause, including from plenty of celebrities ranging from Kevin Costner to Bianca Jagger. That week, the Democratic Convention was the place to be seen on the screen beamed internationally.

Additional stump speeches, including David Wade, President, College Democrats of America, who assaulted the tiring crowd before the evening program. At this point, only the cable stations and the Democratic faithful were following the proceedings. An estimated 5,000 seats in the upper deck remained empty. A few tiring delegates fell to sleep. Most were standing and talking with other party regulars, clogging the aisles while the speeches continued. Then John H. Stroger, President of the Cook County Board of Commissioners, stepped forward. The Convention met within his geographic domain as well as Mayor Daley's. In fact, the two powerful politicians shared the same fifth floor of Chicago's City/County Building. "Thanks to President Clinton," the well-liked politician hyperbolized, "We are stopping crime before it even happens." The crowd of believers chanted, "Four More Years, Four More Years." But National Chair Fowler was getting nervous. "Well, if we don't get moving here on our agenda, we'll be late for four more years."

Video biographies played before most of the important speakers, as it did for Oscar winner Edward James Olmos of Hollywood, best known for his film "Stand and Deliver" and the "Miami Vice" TV series. "When young people feel that they don't have a future, then their present is not compelling. It doesn't matter to them if they harm someone or put themselves in harm's way." He pleaded for more help and attention for the nation's youth. Olmos then introduced two young people who were part of the Democratic Youth Bus Tour. More speeches followed, by Senator Moseley Braun and Deborah DeLee, Convention CEO. Viewers also saw a high-speed videotape of The United Center's conversion to Convention Hall and a photograph of

all the union members who worked on the project. The transformation from basketball arena cost \$5 million.

Finally, it was evening Prime Time when the party scheduled speakers it hoped would draw evening viewers on NBC, CBS, ABC to go along with the loyal or curious cable audience. South Dakota Senate Minority Leader Thomas A. Daschle stepped forward to cheers. He was among the party's top two congressional personalities. According to Chair Fowler, Daschle prevented "...this past Congress from becoming a disorderly stampede in the discredited direction of Newt Gingrich and his Agenda for America." Daschle was a smooth and sincere politician who gained the trust of most Democrats. "We're as diverse as any political party can be, and tonight we are as united," he prompted the crowd to self-congratulatory applause. "We are a Nation that prizes individuals, but we're also a Nation in which communities come together to help their neighbors do what they can't do alone."

Daschle was followed by his congressional partner, Democratic House Minority Leader Richard A. Gephardt of Missouri. He reminded the crowd that they were gathered to re-elect a President "who has led and won great battles, from increasing the minimum wage to passing health care reform to defending civil rights...." Next, the nation heard optimistic remarks from William M. Daley, Co-Chair, "Chicago '96," who exclaimed "...this is a time of renewal and hope for our party and our city."

His older brother, Mayor Richard M. Daley, was supposed to be introduced by a video biography, but the technology failed. It was unnecessary anyway. He articulated what few had forgotten during all the preparation. The wounds of 1968 had healed slowly but were now in the distant past. "The last time we met in Chicago to nominate a candidate for President, America was at war, abroad and at home....This year we gather under happier circumstances. America is

at peace." Peace and Prosperity from the time of President Ulysses S. Grant in 1868, who declared "Let There Be Peace," was a winning politically formula, and a welcomed one.

Hall of Famer "Mr. Cub" Ernie Banks spoke. So did Ohio worker Todd Clancy. Twenty-one-year old Marilyn Concepcion, a community service volunteer from Rhode Island, put in words of support for Clinton. Then former Republican presidential Press Secretary James Brady, who had been critically wounded in the assassination attempt against President Reagan, and his wife Sarah, now both national gun reform advocates, sent greetings to the viewing nation and world. Sarah argued "...gun violence is not a Democrat or a Republican problem. It's a problem that affects each and every one of us....Every year in this country, 40,000 are killed with firearms. More than 100,000 are wounded." (More than a quarter century later when the Democrats returned to Chicago in 2024, gun violence and mass shootings were an even bigger, more serious problem. After 1996, despite repeated and sickening mass shootings of innocent citizen, often children, nothing even as weak as the Brady Ban on Assault Weapons was passed again by Democrats or Republicans or a bipartisan coalition in Congress.

The Bradys were followed by John Stafford, Superintendent of Seattle Public Schools. Then "Superman," the popular but now partially paralyzed actor Christopher Reeve, made an intelligent and passionate appeal for more medical research aid. By featuring the Bradys and Reeve, Democrats hope to gain the attention of the American viewing public. Finally, Gulf War veteran Patrick Ellis from Southern University in Louisiana introduced the cast of the popular musical "Rent," and after its performance, the First Session of the Forty-Second Democratic National Convention was ready to recess with the Benediction by Dr. Vashi Mackenzie, of Maryland. "Open our eyes that we might see what we are, and what we have, and what we can

do with the gifts that have been measured to us in this hour." The Convention broke up as the networks stopped covering it, adjourning until the next afternoon.

The next morning, TV rating came in. More than 17 million viewers had tuned into the Democratic Convention's first day, about two million fewer than had watched the Republicans' first day in San Diego two weeks earlier, and about six million fewer than watched the first day of the Democratic Convention four years earlier. But on the ground, the four-day political extravaganza was gaining momentum. Chicago was at its summer finest, beautiful, and bustling. Delegates who had attended scores of parties across the city were enjoying it all.

One event hosted by John F. Kennedy Jr.'s hipster magazine *George* drew 600 VIPs to the famed Art Institute of Chicago on Michigan Avenue. People watchers outside caught sight of Jim Belushi, Dan Akroyd, Oprah Winfried, Eleanor Mondale, Maria Shriver, Tom Brokaw, Al Franken, former Chicago Mayor and current Chief Justice of the Illinois Supreme Court Michael Bilandic with socialite wife Heather, and Chicago best-selling author Scott Turow among many familiar faces. By Convention's end, delegates attended 240 parties, including on boats, restaurants, and cultural institutions like the one the Illinois delegation hosted at the Chicago Historical Society.

Protestors

All the while, protestors tried to get the attention of delegates or the press. Pulitzer Prize winning Chicago columnist Mike Royko wrote, "... riots are one of the most entertaining forms of TV violence and viewers never tire of them. Even a small riot is more gripping than a windy keynote speech." Mayor Richard M. Daley supplied 59 protest groups ranging from Amnesty International and Cures Not Wars to the Not on the Guest List Coalition and the Chicago

People's Convention Coalition with a stage, sound system, bathrooms, and free bottles of water. No single issue united them. Pro-life and pro-choice advocates vied for attention. Those who came to protest mostly avoided the city's official "Protest Pits," including Parking Lot E, fenced off at one side of The United Center. The site was "clearly...within sound and site of the delegates," explained '96 Convention CEO Debra DeLee, but barely. Each group was assigned a time to demonstrate.

"They want us to walk on the sidewalks," one leader complained to the *Chicago Sun-Times*. "We want to march in the streets." A federal judge allowed 20 protestors at a time to demonstrate just outside of the arena where entering delegates clearly could see them. He also ruled protestors didn't need to go to the City to ask permission to exercise their First Amendment rights. Perhaps as an act of historical humor, a second protest site was located at Balbo and Michigan Avenue across from the Hilton and Blackstone hotels, traditional headquarters of presidential candidates and site of the worst 1968 confrontations. It was little used. Likewise, most businesses near The United Center were little visited.

Protestors were basically ignored by delegates and other guests and treated as oddities by the press which nostalgically reminisced about 1968, its significance, and its ramifications. "Do any of us look worried?" one officer laughed about the protestors' threat to disrupt the Convention. Many CPD officers were getting overtime. And in 1996, the Chicago Police Department was much more sophisticated, educated, and well-trained. Policing philosophies had changed over the past three decades. But the Fraternal Order of Police complained that officers worked 12 hour shifts with little food or water, and spent \$5,000 on box lunches. "The city spent all that money on flowers and trees. They should have spent some on ham sandwiches," union president Bill Nolan protested.

To the distaste of civil libertarians, Chief Rodriguez also requested special powers to bring back police infiltration and surveillance of potentially dangerous groups, particularly “terrorists,” foreign or domestic, such as one who bombed and destroyed a government building in Oklahoma City in 1995, or whoever bombed the Atlanta ‘96 Olympics earlier in summer. The threat of mass terrorism seemed far more dangerous than the mostly peaceful anti-war and Civil Rights mass demonstrations of the 1960s. (The Republican Congress, with liberal Democratic support, recently had killed President Clinton’s anti-terrorism bill because of fears that it would violate civil liberties. The House passed a weaker version. The Senate did not vote on it.) An equally likely threat was that law enforcement would cast its efforts broadly and surveil others as well.

SDS (Students for a Democratic Society) co-founder Tom Hayden, one of the indicted 1968 Chicago protest leaders, now a California state senator at 58 years old, also was a 1996 delegate. He lodged in the old red brick Chicago Hilton Hotel & Towers at Michigan Avenue and Balbo where protestors were beaten, gassed, and pushed through a large glass window on nomination night 1968. Pacifist Dave Dellinger returned in 1996 at age 81 to get arrested, not by Chicago cops, but federal agents for trespassing while protesting “unequal justice.” Their antics made good sidebars for reporters searching for a police/protestor story. (Former Illinois Governor Dan Walker, who headed the investigation into the 1968 conflict, “Rights in Conflict” and had called the melee a “police riot,” told the *Chicago Tribune*, “My study showed that the majority of the police department behaved very responsibly.” What a difference a quarter century makes in perspectives.)

But most news stories avoided or missed the main political point of the 1968 demonstrations on nomination day; that the whole violent confrontation occurred briefly after the Democrats in Convention voted down the anti-Vietnam war platform plank, despite the fact that

anti-war candidates Eugene McCarthy and Robert F. Kennedy had won all but the first primary election (New Hampshire, where President Johnson won 49 percent with a write-in effort, but was declared the loser). Nominee Hubert H. Humphrey neither entered nor won any 1968 primary. Finally, the work and hopes of anti-war activists were utterly dashed. It was the end of peaceful dissent. The war against the war began that night. That was the political point. But now in 1996, some of those protestors were in power, among them the President himself, who had been an anti-war demonstrator back then.

Richard M. Daley got credit for how he handled 1996 protestors. Writing in *The Chicago Tribune*, novelist Scott Turow concluded, “The present mayor has his faults. But he has a compassion his father seemed to lack, at least in his public persona. And in trying to restore to the city, safe, high quality education, he has shown himself to be that rare American leader...” (For the record, Chicago voters gave his father, Richard J., a 70 percent-plus confidence vote in 1971, the first election following his handling of both the 1968 King assassination and Democratic Convention riots. Four years later, Daley senior easily won his sixth and final term, before dying in office.)

Convention Day Two

In early afternoon Tuesday, delegates bused from lakefront hotels to the Convention’s second day at The United Center. The *Chicago Tribune*’s front page account concluded, “At the Republican Convention in San Diego, the opening night speaker gave a speech that didn’t sound very different from the one that opened the Democratic Convention Monday.” In Congress, the parties were mostly rhetorical enemies. In this election, their rhetoric seemed to be like Tweedle Dee and Tweedle Dum.

The conclave was called to order at 3:15 p.m. on Tuesday, August 27, 1996, by Vice Chair, Congresswoman Nancy Pelosi. After an invocation by Rabbi Moshe Faskowitz and a violin version of the National Anthem by Chicagoan Rachel Barton, Pelosi reminded delegates that presidential nomination petitions needed to be submitted to the Office of the Secretary by 6 p.m. that night. The party wanted no surprise candidates as in Conventions of old, not that the mood in 1996 called for any. President Clinton was popular and he was in control of his own re-nomination. Pelosi lavishly extolled the President. "With his vision, his knowledge, and his plan of action, which will promote opportunity, responsibility, and community, Bill Clinton will lead us boldly into the next century." Pelosi reinforced the Convention's themes of unity and progress. President Clinton was building a bridge to the new, hopeful 21st Century.

Then another video flashed onto the stage's big screen, the President speaking again from his campaign train. He told the slowly growing Convention crowd, "The purpose of politics and the purpose of work is to enable people to live out their dreams, to enable them to raise strong families and raise strong communities and advance the cause of freedom. That's the purpose of all of this, and that's what we're trying to do."

The Democrat's 1996 Platform was presented by Georgia Governor Zell Miller and Representative Louise M. Slaughter of New York, who headed the committee. It already had been approved by President Clinton and the DNC. Instead of reading the entire platform as in past Conventions, speakers presented little snippets followed by personal stories and rhetoric that when woven together painted the bigger picture of party ideals. "Over the past four years as a Senior Member of the House Budget Committee, I worked closely with President Clinton to reduce the budget deficit and I am pleased to report... For the first time in 150 years, we have cut the federal deficit four years in a row under a single President," Slaughter bragged. The audience

responded affirmatively. (As Republican Senate Minority Leader Everett Dirksen of Illinois reputedly said back in the 1960s, “A billion dollars here, a billion dollars there, and pretty soon we’re talking about real money,” except now the federal government was tossing around trillions of dollars, and the national debt was exploding. In 1996, the national debt reached \$5.181 trillion. By the 2024 Convention, that number had ballooned to more than \$33 trillion.)

North Dakota Senator Bryon Dorgan and West Virginia Governor Gaston Caperton followed Slaughter. Caperton said, "President Clinton challenged the Nation's schools to become technologically literate, to become true classrooms for the 21st Century." Representative Xavier Becerra of California added, "President Clinton started the Safe and Drug-Free Schools program..." (Actually, the man who “never inhaled” was following First Lady Nancy Reagan’s much derided “Just Say No” campaign. And by the next time Democrats gathered for their Convention 28 years later in 2024, the City of Chicago and the State of Illinois had gone from being among the biggest jailers of drug offenders to big pushers of pot, like other cities and States, to bring in millions in tax revenue. The “War on Drugs,” like other bi-partisan, political wars on social ills was lost, or at least reconceived and redefined.)

President Clinton, speaking on the big, front screen from his “21st Century Express,” added a new idea. "Today, I propose a national literacy campaign, a plan that offers 30,000 reading specialist and volunteer coordinators to communities that are willing to do their part." Several speakers testified to the help they received from the federal government in doing business during Clinton’s first term. Representative Anna G. Eshoo of California noted, "Just as President Kennedy summoned the genius of America to reach the moon, President Clinton has summoned our generation to harness technology, for this is our next frontier."

Another speaker, another theme, and New York's Representative Charles E. Schumer bellowed, "As Democrats, we stand by law enforcement. We stand up to the NRA, and we stand to give America once and for all the safe streets that it deserves." (That line worked for the Republicans in 1968. It would work for the Democrats in 1996. And in 2024, voters will hear it again from both parties.) Kate Michelman, president of the National Abortion Rights Action League, avowed, "I'm here to stand up for choice. And to speak one truth: pro-choice is not pro-abortion." Congresswoman Cynthia McKinney of Georgia, added, "As a mother myself, I believe that abortion in America should be legal, safe, and rare. You make your moral decisions. I'll make mine. Let's just leave Newt Gingrich out of it." (In 1996, there were approximately 1,360,160 legal U.S. abortions; in 2023, 916,3000.)

Philadelphia Mayor Edward G. Rendell focused on the reinventing government plank of the platform. "Today, the federal government is the smallest it's been since John F. Kennedy was President." Texas State Comptroller John Sharp pointed out, "It doesn't make a lot of headlines, but Al Gore's efforts to reinvent government have saved taxpayers \$60 billion so far." Congressman John M. Spratt of South Carolina explained that, "Our armed forces have been scaled down because the Cold War is won and that threat is receding. But whenever there is heavy lifting to do, we still get the call because our armed forces are still the finest in the world and we intend for them to stay that way." (The 1996 Defense Department budget was \$1.45 trillion. In 1968, at the height of the Vietnam War, it stood at \$73 billion. And by the time of the 2024 Convention, it had soared to more than \$753 billion, five times that of its closest competitor, China.)

Then several speakers explained the party's platform support for free trade, veteran affairs, community development, families, agriculture, and rural issues. "We are blessed with the

most reliable, the most abundant, the most affordable, and the safest food supply in the history of the world," bragged Texas Congressman Charles W. Stenholm. "...with \$60 billion in exports made possible by the productivity of our farmers and President Clinton's trade policies, agriculture is the leading contributor to our balance of trade." (Since 1976, the U.S. consistently ran trade deficits of nearly a billion dollars a year.)

His remarks were followed by statements on welfare. Earlier in August, Clinton had signed legislation "to end welfare as we know it." That alienated many party progressives, the Congressional Black Caucus, and others, while attracting Independents who wanted those able to work to do so. Kansas City Mayor Emanuel Cleaver II argued, "But my friends, as we all know too well, mere family never made a person prosperous, principled, or polite. It takes a whole village to raise a child." He echoed a major theme articulated by First Lady Clinton. "But for too many, our welfare system has become a hand-out and not a hand-up they so desperately need and deserve," chided Representative Nita M. Lowey of New York.

The crowd then listened, not too patiently, to the Democrat's position on healthcare, AIDS, the environment. In retrospect, there was no platform panic about "Global Warming," or "Terrorism," or "crippling debt," or "Pandemic," or "Perpetual Wars," dangers waiting on the other side of the "Bridge to the 21st Century." Florida Lieutenant Governor Buddy MacKay Jr. argued, "We can have a healthy economy and a healthy environment for future generations." Democrats were committed to a balanced budget, "but we won't do it on the backs of the people who built this country and made a great," insisted Senator John D. Rockefeller IV of West Virginia. (Once, when asked if his grandfather John D. Rockefeller, then the richest man in the world, ever bought him any blocks to play with, the savvy Senator reputedly replied, "Yes, 53rd, 52nd, and 51st streets" in New York City.)

In between platform planks, speakers hurled pointed jabs at the Republicans. "I am a Republican for Clinton.... I stand in anguished opposition to the new Republican politics of retreat from the sacred responsibility of the USA to guarantee justice and opportunity for all," shouted Justin Dart of California. Linda Crawford of Maryland thanked the Convention. "President Clinton's new FDA regulations blocking access to tobacco products by minors and curtailing advertising designed to appeal to children are measures that will save lives...." Zell Miller closed the Platform presentation, calling it "a roadmap for the 21st Century." A voice vote with no 'Nays' adopted the 1996 Democrat Party Platform. In Conventions of old, platform fights offered some of the most dramatic moments and best debates of the get-togethers (such as the 1924 proposed plank to condemn the Ku Klux Klan "by name," which failed by one vote). Now the party stood solidly united, with few voices of dissent.

Then the heavy hitters took center stage for the evening cable TV audience, although not yet Prime Time for the major networks. The major networks' coverage had been cut back considerably from the days of gavel-to-gavel broadcasts in the 1950s or even full evening coverage of the 1960s. In the 1950s and 60s, eight of 10 TV households tuned into Convention events. Now the networks allotted only one hour a night to the first three nights, and two hours during the President's acceptance evening. In 1996, only CNN and Internet sites offered gavel to gavel coverage. PBS showed the entire evening, with commentators speaking over some party orators. The cable stations devoted 50 hours to Convention week. But during the Republican Convention earlier that month, NBC chose to air its top rated "Seinfeld" comedy rather than vice presidential nominee Jack Kemp's acceptance speech.

To rousing applause, Representative Jesse L. Jackson Jr. of Illinois presented his father, Civil Rights icon, Reverend Jesse Louis Jackson, Statehood Senator from the District of

Columbia, and founder of Operation PUSH (People United to Save Humanity). At the 1988 Convention, Jackson gave a 45-minute speech in support of nominee Michael Dukakis, who had defeated him in the primaries. Now he was limited to about five minutes. Congressman Jackson noted that his father twice ran for the highest office, but now was a Clinton loyalist. He was also a persistent critic, but was on stage tonight to show party unity. At recent Conventions, Jackson delivered fiery speeches. This evening, he was more subdued, poignant. "What is our challenge tonight? ...One-fifth of all American children go to bed in poverty tonight. Half of all America's African American children grew up amidst broken sidewalks, broken hearts, broken cities, and broken dreams. The number one growth industry in urban America... jails." Jackson's rhythmic presentation thrilled the crowd. They were in total agreement with him that the nation had to do much more to help those most in need. But Clinton was trying to forge a third path between perceived waste of taxpayer dollars and real human need. Party progressive in years to come would agree with Jackson that Clinton's route was far too narrow to meet all of those who needed help. But massive spending, much of it on the military and wars, resulted in massive debt. At the end of World War II, the United States was a creditor nation. By 1996, the U.S. was reliant on exploding debt and borrowing, even from its former "enemies" such as China. Clinton managed to reduce the yearly budget deficit, but not the national debt, not that Republicans did any better in subsequent years despite their rhetoric.

Jackson wasn't the only giant in the room during the Convention's second night of speeches, videos, dancing, and musical transitions. The nation faced real problems at home and abroad. Former Senate Majority Leader George J. Mitchell of Maine informed the now attentive crowd about his progress in the Middle East, Haiti, and Northern Ireland Peace Talks. "Where

conflict continues, President Clinton has committed the United States to the cause of peace and justice." His was a grim reminder of conflict around the globe, far from the Chicago dance floor.

The announcer then welcomed "...one of the greatest governors from the State of New York, Mario Cuomo." The spellbinder was a crowd favorite, just like Jackson, but more a figure of the past than the future. (Cuomo was defeated in his bid to win a fourth term by Republican George Pataki, during the 1994 "Republican Revolution.") Hence he also was denied Prime Time exposure by party schedulers. "The last time, the last time that we all came together four years ago, this was a very different Party. Many Americans, you recall, had lost faith in us, and frankly many Democrats had as well. The truth is, beginning in 1970s the heart of our Democratic Party, America's strongest surviving middle class, began drifting away from us." Then he asked, "Who will say today that Democrats are in love with big government, and big spending, after Bill Clinton has cut the federal government dramatically and brought the deficit down by 60 percent?" Yet, Cuomo warned, "... wherever we are in this great land, whether we are rich, struggling, desperate, either we make it, all of us together, or there is no America worth the gift that God has given this blessed place."

Musical interludes and "The Macarena" loosened the crowd and short biographical videos kept the parade moving. House Leader Richard A. Gephardt spoke on behalf of the Democrats' Families First Agenda that he said begins "with the basic idea that those who raise our families should not be diminished or impoverished in their older years. Families First is a response to an economy that's been transformed by technological revolution and international markets. Families First says that no American should have to compete unfairly with sweatshop wages overseas."

Senator Joseph Robinette Biden Jr. of Delaware, a future Vice President and President, warned that "... Robert Dole[‘s] White House and a Newt Gingrich Congress will try to overturn

that assault weapons ban." He added, "That's why we passed in 1994 Crime Law that has already put 44,000 new police officers on our streets doing community policing." Years later, that law would be denounced by Democratic progressives for putting too many minorities in jail.

Congresswoman Lynn Rivers of Michigan quipped, "Our Families First proposal for children's health insurance is just what the doctor ordered."

The Convention crowd listened attentively to the Vice President's wife Tipper Gore "one of our most articulate and strongest advocates for America's parents and children...." Mrs. Gore, dressed in a navy blue suit, urged the crowd to "...pledge tonight that we will continue building a future that is more caring, more humane, more civil, more tolerant, and more virtuous...." Amen. Finally, the networks again joined the party as a roar went up when the Second Lady introduced her friend, First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton. "Chicago Loves Hillary" signs bobbed throughout the excited crowd. She was clothed in a tailored, light blue pants suit.

The First Lady, a 48-year-old Yale educated lawyer, who had been entangled in the "Whitewater" Arkansas real estate, and FBI files scandals, and ridiculed for her role in pushing health care reform, as well as her best-selling book, *It Takes A Village*, now had her chance to silence critics. They also objected to her activist role in White House policy and painted her as a cold, calculating, secretive presence in the nation's affairs. "I wish we could be sitting around a kitchen table, just us, talking about our hopes and fears about our children's futures," she began in a folksy, former Arkansas First Lady manner. "For Bill and me, family has been the center of our lives, but we also know that our family, like your family, is part of a larger community that can help or hurt our best efforts to raise our child....It takes all of us. Yes, it takes a village," she beamed. "It takes a village and it takes a President....It takes Bill Clinton." Afterward Mrs. Gore

joined the First Lady on the podium as the lectern lowered to allow them to wave unobstructed to the ecstatic crowd.

Delegates and media commentators were more than pleased with her polished and caring presentation. The next morning's *Chicago Tribune* headlines read, "First Lady Fires Back at Her Foes, Clinton defends Democrats' agenda on families, health care" and on the future of the nation's children. But syndicated conservative columnist Robert Novak charged that, "The First Lady's speech recast her as a traditional president's wife rather than fierce partisan." He also quoted a California delegate who objected, "Our Convention is a sham, just like the one in San Diego was a sham. Both tried to hide what they stand for." (True and false.)

The Convention's second evening closed out with remarks from several hopeful candidates for the House of Representatives, the U.S. Senate, and finally, the Keynote Address by the young, handsome, cool Indiana Governor, Evan Bayh. His speech was still covered by the TV networks. Bayh was a Democratic moderate, who twice won election in the predominantly Republican State of Indiana. He represented the generational change his party hoped to project in contrast to the more elderly Republican nominee Bob Dole. The Keynote Address that once had been a very early focal point of Conventions gone-by was now pushed off to the edge of the second evening as many weary viewers were signing off. "The challenges we face are new. But the values that must guide us are the same... opportunity for all Americans, responsibility from all Americans, and a renewed sense of community among all Americans." Those had been Democrat themes since FDR and were at the core of Clinton's just released book, *Between Hope and History: Meeting America's Challenges for the 21st Century*.

The evening ended as the speakers and their children gathered on stage to wave at the cameras and delegates. Near the rear stood the Keynoter's father, former U.S. Senator from

Indiana, Birch Bayh, who in Congress introduced the 26th Amendment that extended the Vote to 18-year-olds and who survived a plane wreck with his friend Senator Edward Kennedy. As the crowd filed out, it heard the voices of the Soul Children of Chicago. Then Representative Gephardt recessed until the next afternoon. A CBS poll after the Convention's first two days showed Clinton increasing his lead to 51 percent, while Dole polled at 36 percent and Perot at 8 percent. Even if the TV audience wasn't as large as in the past, the Convention's positive tone and coverage was having the desired impact.

Convention Day Three

The third day of 1996 Democratic National Convention was called to order on Wednesday, August 28 at 3:29 p.m. by an upbeat Senator Moseley Braun. She reminded delegates that all vice presidential nominating petitions needed to be submitted by nine o'clock the next morning to the Office of the Secretary in the Stetson Suites of the new Hyatt Regency Hotel across the river from the Sheridan Chicago Hotel & Towers, where the President resided. After the Invocation by Reverend Altargarcia Perez and the National Anthem, the Convention heard a long parade of short stump speeches before the main addresses of the night by Vice President Albert Gore Jr.

Moseley Braun's remarks were followed by several speakers. Governor Thomas Carper of Delaware thanked everyone in Chicago "who has made us feel so welcome and who have done a terrific job in helping us erase 1968 forever, and to remember 1996 forever." He was followed by Governor Mel Carnahan of Missouri, former Maine Governor Joe Brennan, Congressman Jack Reed of Rhode Island, and others, before Patterson, New Jersey, Mayor William J. Pascrell Jr. thundered, "Stand up and be counted, and together with President Clinton,

we will protect Medicare and Social Security and a woman's, right to choose." Democrats pulled out that slogan every four years and voted that way in Congress whenever those issues arose. When the Democrats returned to Chicago a quarter century later in 2024, at least the abortion theme still resonated as a lingering controversy that the body politic had yet to resolve.

Chicago's loquacious congressional candidate from the West Side, Danny K. Davis, confirmed, "We are the Party of diversity, inclusivity, the Party that believes in organized labor, the Party of affirmative action, the Party of daycare centers, community health centers, clean air, pure water, and occupational safety." Energetic Illinois State Representative Rod R. Blagojevich, running for Congress from Illinois' 5th congressional district on Chicago's Northwest Side and the State's future governor, eventually impeached, added, "I have news for Mr. Gingrich and his fellow revolutionaries in Congress. Working Americans want more police on their streets, not more assault weapons."

A host of other elected officials and aspiring candidates added their voices to the Democratic attack before another videotape update from the "21st Century Express." The President declared, "I want an America in the year 2000 where no child should have to live near a toxic waste dump, where no parent should have to worry about the safety of a child's glass of water, and no neighborhood should be put in harm's way by pollution from a nearby factory." He called for a new program to fight those problems. (In 2024, Chicago was still trying to get lead pipes and water out of its schools and various neighborhoods.)

The restless delegates and spectators heard from more than 30 other speakers. Representative Barney Frank of Massachusetts argued that, "A vigorous, adequately funded public sector is not a threat to a growing and thriving private sector, but a very important partner for it." Senator Frank Lautenberg of New Jersey insisted, "This is not the time for retreat. This is

not the time to roll back environmental safeguards. There is still much to do. Bill Clinton and Al Gore are the environmental cops on the beat...." Representative Maxine Waters of California chided the nation, "As I travel across America's cities, young black and Latino males hanging on corners with nothing to do, nowhere to go, nothing to hope for always ask, 'Ms. Waters, can you help me find a job?'" The Clinton boom economy had reached too few of them.

John Sweeney, president of the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO), thundered, "My sisters and brothers, our idea of a just society is one in which honest labor raises the standard of living for all rather than enormous wealth for the few." (Labor had been one of the foundations of the Democrat Party since it was organized by President Andrew Jackson of Tennessee and his Vice President Martin Van Buren of New York in the late 1820s and early 1830s in a rural/labor coalition. Now the Democrat party also represented wealth and corporate power and few farmers.) Then the National Anthem was sung again, by popular country artist Billy Ray Cyrus. The big TV networks were tuning in.

Sweeney was followed by Senator Barbara Milukski of Maryland who scolded, "...Let me repeat, we know that government programs are not a substitute for parents. But cutting Head Start is no way to help a family raise a child. Head Start is a family value. And those who say they believe in family values should be supporting Head Start, not eliminating it." Dianne Feinstein, the popular Senator from California, added, "Change begins with each and every family in America taking responsibility for their children, supporting and loving them, teaching them the difference between right and wrong."

Finally, the Convention heard from Vice President Gore. The President watched from his 31st floor Sheridan suite with his friends Vernon Jordan Jr., a powerful D.C. attorney and former leader of the National Urban League, and Erskine Bowles, Clinton's former Chief of Staff.

President Clinton's "21 Century Express" had arrived in Michigan City, Indiana, on Wednesday, where he was cheered by a crowd that swelled to an estimated 30,000. From there, he helicoptered to a baseball field of the 50-year-old University of Illinois at Chicago, which Mayor Richard J. Daley cited as his greatest achievement. Located on the city's Near West Side, the landing site was just up the street from the famed Hull House of Jane Addams, one of the founders of social work for new immigrants and the poor, and a Nobel Peace Prize winner. Democrats were carrying on her work.

Clinton took up residence in the new Sheridan Chicago, situated along the banks of the restored Chicago River. Mayor Richard J. Daley, who started the long clean-up effort of the badly polluted river, said he dreamed of the day when it would be so revived that businessmen would go fishing during their lunch breaks. The fish returned, but not the business/fishermen. The tall off-white hotel was located just east of where Haitian-born fur trader Jean Baptiste Point du Sable built his home and trading post in 1779. He left the future Chicago to move down the Illinois River before it became a town when the first settlers started moving in and Fort Dearborn was built in 1803.

(Bronze plaques in the sidewalk at the south corner of today's Michigan Avenue where it meets the river mark the fort's location, and across the river on the north side, near his former home, a statue pays tribute to Point du Sable. The fort was burnt to the ground during the War of 1812 by Pottawatomie residents who were being pushed out by new American settlers, then rebuilt. Chicago became a city in 1837 and never stopped growing and changing. And its river never stopped working for it. The reversal of the flow of the Chicago River in 1900 to deal with epidemics caused by dumping waste into the lake's drinking water was considered one of the engineering wonders of the modern world. By 1996, the river was primarily a tourist attraction,

not an economic engine itself. But by 2024, it featured a popular Riverwalk packed with people and popular restaurants.)

Gore started off with a little humor. "This is some crowd. I've been watching you do the Macarena on television. If I could have your silence, I would like to demonstrate for you the Al Gore version of the Macarena." He stood stiffly while the crowd watched. He didn't move. "Would you like to see it again?" The throng laughed at the Vice President's self-deprecation about his so called "wooden" image.

Then he became serious and more animated. "Time and again, Americans have seen the need for change and have taken the initiative to bring that change to life, but always with a struggle, always with opponents. Senator Dole was there. We remember. We remember that he voted against the creation of Medicare, against the creation of Medicaid, against the Clean Air Act, against Head Start, against the Peace Corps in the 1960s and AmeriCorps in the 1990s. He even voted against the funds to send a man to the moon. If he's the most optimistic man in America, (Dole had called himself that) I'd hate to see the pessimists. That pessimistic view of America is very different from ours, and we saw that in the budget that Senator Dole and Speaker Gingrich tried to slip past the American people last fall.... Americans don't believe our best days are behind us. We see better days ahead, because we have the courage to meet our challenges and protect our values. And now, once again, in pursuit of the American Dream, we are crossing the bridge to the future." He received prolonged, thrilled, and appreciative applause for his four years of service with the President and for his articulation of the party's vision.

Congressman Bill Richardson from New Mexico added that, "The voices of division play siren song for some of our citizens. It's easy to blame, defame, and not act without shame. And you know that type. But our President reminds us that we are bigger than that, better than that."

At last it was time for the presidential nominating speech. In the early days of Conventions, candidates were nominated with a single sentence. (At the 1860 (second) Republican National Convention in Chicago, Norman Judd, a Chicago lawyer and national committee member rose to declare, "I desire, on behalf of the delegation from Illinois, to put in nomination as a candidate for President of the United States, Abraham Lincoln of Illinois.")

Senator Christopher J. Dodd of Connecticut, General Chair of the Convention, had the honor to present a more full-throated oration. "My friends, America, America remembers that cold and brilliant January day 44 months ago when a young Governor raised in a small town of North Arkansas brought new hope to a nation hungry for new change." He rattled off achievements of the Clinton administration. "Today, our economy is stronger and more prosperous than it has been in more than three decades. But as we all know, that effort is not finished. People today work longer, hard hours to pay their bills. But they are working. And they have a chance to move ahead because President Clinton took a stand while his opponents turned away." After excoriating the Republican nominee, Dodd finished with a shout, "I proudly placed in nomination before this Convention and this country the name of America's President, William Jefferson Clinton!" The Convention broke into a wild but familiar chant, "four more years, four more years!" (Hadn't Richard Nixon's supporters used that one in 1972? Several second-term Presidents probably wished they didn't take those extra four years.)

Unlike most past Conventions, the President's nomination was seconded by a single speaker instead of a line of worthies. The 1996 honor went to Detroit Mayor Dennis Archer. "... Bill Clinton is working with us, with families, religious institutions, business and labor, police and community leaders to attack the problems where we live and attacking problems means attacking them together as one people. So when others try to divide us, putting politics

ahead of principle, Bill Clinton said, 'No, America needs affirmative action. We're going to mend it, not end it.' Because we're on the right track but we haven't finished the journey.'" (Will the 2024 Democratic National Convention hit the same note after the Supreme Court ended it?)

Secretary Kathleen M. Vick proceeded with the Presidential Roll Call of the States. This was one of the rare chances for State delegations to chime in on the Convention's high-tech communications system. Alabama Chair Joe Turnham bellowed, "Madam Secretary, I rise on behalf of the great State of Alabama, birthplace to many heroes such as Hank Aaron, a State which proudly features a delegation as diverse as Alabama itself." He then yielded to the President's home State of Arkansas, where the Chair Bynum Gibson "...proudly cast our 47 votes for the man from Hope, Bill Clinton, President of the United States!" The Roll Call continued through all the States and Territories to the Virgin Islands where Chair Marylyn Stapleton cast four votes from "...the home of two million tourists, the home and place where President Clinton assisted us during Hurricane Maryland and Hurricane Bertha..."

Secretary Vick announced, "I am happy to tell you that we have a total delegate vote of 4,277 votes for the next President of the United States." Clinton was officially re-nominated at 11:58 a.m. Eastern Time when Ohio cast its votes. Surprisingly, no one bothered to move to make his nomination unanimous (4,289 total delegates), as with the Vice President, and as was common at many past Conventions. "Thank you and good night all." Senator Daschle then introduced Reverend Clay Evans of Chicago who delivered the Benediction. "We thank you for this day and the many, many blessings that thou has sent our way. Thank you for this young leader and his family..." The next morning, a *Chicago Tribune/Hotline* poll showed the Convention's first two days had not created a "bounce." This poll showed Clinton at 45 percent,

Dole at 38 percent, and Perot falling to only 7 percent. (The Dow Jones Industrials closed at 5712.38.)

Day Four Diversion

The 1996 Convention's last day, Thursday, August 29, was designed to be the President's big night, when the Nation would tune in to hear the gifted speaker's acceptance speech, when he would put an exclamation point on his party's central theme of families first. But before he could take the podium, his message was not quite derailed, but badly detoured, by a breaking political story that made the family values refrain ring hollow. Organizers bragged that this gathering had "the greatest security in Convention history." But all the Chicago cops and federal agents swarming the city could not block the political bomb that detonated that morning in Chicago. Word was circulating through the hotel lobbies and the five United Center media tents that *The Star*, a national supermarket tabloid, was ready to print, and the *New York Post* had printed on its front page that morning, an expose about Clinton's most trusted political advisor, Dick Morris, who had just appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine during Convention Week.

Morris was implicated in a \$200-an-hour call girl scandal carried on in his \$440 a day suite in the Jefferson Hotel in Washington five blocks from the White House. What seemed as bad, Morris had shared campaign and White House secrets with his paramour, letting her listen in on confidential phone calls with the President and First Lady. Morris turned in his letter of resignation Wednesday night. In accepting it Thursday morning, President Clinton said Morris, his off-and-on advisor for 18 years, was "a good man" and wished him luck. Mrs. Clinton and other White House aides called to console him as well. The episode immediately resurrected doubts and rumors about President Clinton's own character, the retelling of stories about his

alleged long-term affair with Gennifer Flowers in Arkansas and other sordid dalliances and accusations. Ultimately, the *Time* story about “The Man Who Has Clinton’s Ear” faded as the fall campaign gained steam. But that night, the most important night of the Convention, when as protestors chanted back in 1968, “The whole world is watching,” everyone “was talking about Morris.” (He ended up with a \$2.5 million book deal and again working, with Republican and anti-Clinton candidates.)

Only a prescient political cynic, a perspicuous psychological analyst could have guessed that less than two years later another unseemly sex scandal would wreck Clinton’s presidency and lead to his impeachment (for lying to a grand jury) by a hostile Republican-dominated House of Representatives. (He was not convicted by two thirds of the Senate.) That affair humiliated Clinton and his wife and child, consumed the nation’s perverse media attention for months, and further decayed public values and trust. (The *Chicago Tribune* editorialized that Americans were worried about “a society awash in trash values...”) Clinton was somewhat redeemed by his party’s strong victory in the 1998 mid-term congressional elections, showing that many American voters ranked everyday political sex scandals low on their agenda of real concerns. Still, the opportunity to advance issues celebrated at this Convention was hampered if not squandered. The public and private scandal also led to Hillary’s redemption in an independent political career as U.S. Senator from New York and presidential candidate, although those achievements might have happened anyway.

Acceptance Speeches

Yet, the show had to go on and the Convention’s penultimate session was called to order at 3:54 p.m. by Albuquerque Mayor Martin J. Chavez, followed by an Invocation delivered by

Reverend Tony Campolo of Pennsylvania. "This day, we pray, especially for the President, even as we pray for Senator Dole, protect them from harm. Give them thy wisdom, watch over their families." In front of the video wall of 56 television screens played violinist Emmylou Harris. Then a tribute to past Democratic Presidents Franklin D. Roosevelt, Harry S Truman, and John Fitzgerald Kennedy flashed on the screen. (DNC producers left out Presidents Woodrow Wilson, Lyndon Johnson, and Jimmy Carter.) President Clinton, then declared on screen, "That's my job, to see that you are challenged with the responsibility to build a community in this country that will enable every man and woman to live to the fullest of their God-given capacity." Clinton was cool, radiated charisma, and seemed unfazed by the scandal frenzy that had consumed the day.

Representative James E. Clyburn of South Carolina read a resolution honoring the Chicago '96 Committee and the people of Chicago. Another resolution saluted Chicago's police, fire, emergency, and security personnel who had watched over the event, including from their new central intelligence 911 Center, with its extensive network of cameras and computers. (It was Chicago's contribution to the emerging national security/surveillance state.) There had been no out-of-control demonstrations or police confrontations this year. Other resolutions praised various people who worked hard to put the Convention together. Then delegates and observers heard from neighboring Indiana's Lieutenant Governor Frank O'Bannon, who was running to replace Keynoter Evan Bayh (He won.). "Bill Clinton has helped end welfare as we knew it. In Indiana, we've led the Nation in moving people from welfare to work."

The assembly restlessly listened to a long assortment of speakers starting with Governor Mel Carnahan of Missouri and Keith Geiger, president of the National Education Association, who reminded his listeners that, "When Congress voted a seven-year budget plan that would have made a \$30 billion cut in education programs, President Clinton said 'No.' He used his veto

pen to protect our children and for that he gets an 'A.'" The crowd also heard from Wisconsin's young progressive U.S. Senator Russell Feingold, who was running for re-election and avoiding the special interest sponsored parties. Feingold was a finance reform champion. (A *New York Times* editorial griped that two decades after the Watergate reforms to limit big corporate contributions "rivers of money flowed into the Republican and Democratic Conventions from special interests, while donors were rewarded with skybox seats, parties, private meetings, and other forms of access to policy makers.)

Kentucky Governor Paul Patton and several others spoke before Congressman Richard J. Durbin, head of the Illinois delegation and candidate for U.S. Senate took the lectern. He told delegates how his father, a heavy smoker, died of lung cancer at age 53. "I am proud that President Clinton is the first President in our history with the courage to join me in fighting to protect our kids from the dangers of smoking." Willie L. Brown Jr., Mayor of San Francisco, further affirmed, "This Party supports Civil Rights, freedom of choice, and affirmative action, as assets, not as liabilities. Black, white, old, young, yellow, red, blue, brown, gay, straight, lesbian, immigrant, Native American, naturalized citizens, one and all. This is the Party of inclusion, not exclusion." (It was true, but historically ironic. Originally, the Democrat party was the party of the "Slaveocracy" and later Jim Crow segregation. Democratic Presidents Kennedy and Johnson changed all that with a barrage of Civil Rights legislation that was enforced, unlike the 14th and 15th Amendments after the Civil War.)

Others had their moment in the limelight including Representative Nydia Velazquez of New York and Representative Edward J. Markey of Massachusetts. Chicago Congressman Luis V. Gutierrez, complained, "Unfortunately, the party of Newt Gingrich's and Proposition 187, doesn't care about our people....Bill Clinton will stand up for us and defend our interests. Our

President has shown that he has seen the true faces of the Latino community, faces streaked with sweat and stained with tears and filled with a hope for a better America.” (By 2024, comprehensive “immigration reform” still had not been passed by Congress, and undocumented migration increased dramatically. Both parties seemed to gain political points by letting the issue fester for nearly half a century.)

Representative Cardiss Collins from Chicago chimed in, "Bob Dole stood before America in San Diego and told us he remembers a time when America was better. When was that, Mr. Dole? Was it when women could not choose what to do with their own lives and bodies? Was it when African Americans and other minorities withstood the horrible indignities of discrimination? Was it when people with disabilities were locked in, and locked out of society? Was it when polluters could ravage our environment at will or women lacked a living wage? Or was it when senior citizens didn't have Medicare, Mr. Dole?" Cheers rose with each accusation.

Collins was supplanted by Representative Nita M. Lowey of New York, Representative Delegate Eleanor Holmes Norton from the District of Columbia, and Representative Patricia Schroeder from Colorado, who lamented, “Thank goodness our culture never bound women’s feet, but it did bind our minds and shut our eyes to family violence.” Representative Rosa DeLauro from Connecticut preceded Representative Charles B. Rangel of New York, who roared, "President Clinton realizes that the problem that we face is not finding out how many people are on welfare or how many people we can put in jail. It's how many hopes, how many dreams can we give to people."

Now the Prime Time networks joined to watch Representative Patrick J. Kennedy from Rhode Island introduce U.S. Senator Edward M. Kennedy. "I am proud that my father has stood

up to the welfare bashing, stood up to the gay bashing, stood up to the immigrant bashing that has consumed the 104th Congress's time." The grand, white-haired, senior statesman of the party thanked his son and launched into his sonorous oration, first praising his older brothers and party heroes. "John and Robert Kennedy summoned new generations to public service. How proud they would be, especially of so many of you gathered here, who answered their call. How proud they would be of a President who was touched in his youth by their example and who has brought our party back to victory and moved our country forward, President Bill Clinton." The crowd responded with enthusiasm and deep appreciation for the surviving brother's unrelenting battles in the halls of Congress for liberal causes. (Mayor Daley and his brother Bill met John F. Kennedy before Bill Clinton did. Clinton's famous July 1963 Boy's State handshake with President Kennedy seemed prophetic. But Mayor Richard J. Daley and his family were President Kennedy's first overnight guests in the White House, the night of his 1961 Inauguration. Chicago had helped Kennedy secure the 1960 election.)

Then popular Cubs' TV announcer Harry Carey led the crowd in a light-hearted rendition of "Take Me Out to the Ball Game." (Hillary was a Cubs fan, before she became a Yankee fan.) That set the stage for the nominating speech for Vice President Albert Gore Jr., delivered by Representative Joseph P. Kennedy II of Massachusetts. He praised the Vice President's record. "There isn't an environmental law that doesn't bear his name, the stamp, or the stewardship of Al Gore." Atlanta Mayor Bill Campbell delivered the single Seconding Speech. A motion to nominate Gore by Acclamation was resoundingly endorsed.

Then Gore stepped forward to deliver his Acceptance Speech. "Ladies and gentlemen, with humility and gratitude for the confidence you have vested in me, with pride in all that we

have accomplished together, and with faith in America's future under Bill Clinton's leadership, I accept your nomination for another term as Vice President of the United States of America."

At last, the most important moment of the Convention arrived. A videotaped biographical and achievements introduction of the President, made by his friend, Hollywood producer Harry Thomason, dominated the big screen and the crowd cheered wildly in anticipation. To a standing ovation, President Clinton, flashing his familiar energetic grin, strolled onto the stage to deliver his Acceptance Speech. First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton and their daughter Chelsea smiled at him from their VIP box above the Convention floor. Beside them sat boxing champion Mohammed Ali, opera star Jesse Norman, Vice President Gore and his wife Tipper. Adulation from the crowd for President Clinton lasted several minutes as he happily waved back at them. His speech lasted over an hour. He had much he wanted to tell the American people about problems and solutions.

"Mr. Chairman," the President began in his casual style. His voice was strong and compellingly friendly and folksy. "Mr. Vice President, my fellow Democrats, my fellow Americans, thank you for your nomination. I don't know if I can find a fancy way to say this, but I accept." Again the Convention jumped to its feet and went wild. Clinton, dressed in a fitted black suit, white shirt, red and black tie, smiled and occasionally bit his lower lip in his familiar manner and nodded his head. "So many have contributed to the record we have made for the American people, but one has contributed above all others, my partner, my friend, and the best Vice President in our history, Al Gore." Again foot stomping and appreciative applause swept the arena. "Tonight, I thank the city of Chicago, its great Mayor, and its wonderful people for this magnificent Convention. I love Chicago for many reasons – for your powerful spirit, your sports teams, your lively politics, but most of all for the love and light of my life, Chicago's

daughter, Hillary. I love you.” Again exuberant applause met his declaration as he looked admiringly up toward the First Lady’s VIP box.

“Four years ago, you and I set off on a journey to bring our vision to our country: to keep the American Dream alive for all who were willing to work for it, to make our American communities stronger, and to keep America the world’s strongest force for peace and freedom and prosperity. Four years ago, with high unemployment, stagnant wages, crime, welfare, and the deficit on the rise, with a host of unmet challenges and a rising tide of cynicism, I told you about a place where I was born, and I told about, and I still believe in, a place called Hope. Well, for four years now, to realize our vision, we have pursued a simple but profound strategy: opportunity for all, a strong united American community....”

The President, who was a fluent and convincing orator, then rattled off the achievements of his administration. "We are on the right track to the 21st Century. Look at the facts: 4.4 million Americans now live in a home of their own for the first time; and hundreds of thousands of women have started their own new businesses; more minorities own businesses than ever before; and a record number of new small businesses and exports. Look at what's happened. We have the lowest combined rates of unemployment, inflation, and home mortgages in 28 years. Look at what happened, 10 million new jobs, over half of them high-wage jobs, 10 million workers getting the raise they deserve with the minimum wage law. Twenty-five million people now have protection in their health insurance because the Kennedy-Kassebaum Bill says you can't lose your insurance anymore when you change jobs, even if somebody in your family has been sick. Forty million Americans with more pension security, and a tax cut for 15 million of our hardest-pressed Americans and all small businesses. Twelve million Americans, 12 million of them, taking advantage of the Family and Medical Leave Law so they can be good parents and

good workers, 10 million students who save money on their college loans. We are making our democracy work...."

His oration touched on achievements of the Motor Voter Bill, increased investments in research and technology, new drugs to deal with HIV and AIDS, 100,000 new police on the streets, 60 thousand felons, fugitives, and stalkers prevented from getting handguns under the Brady Bill, 1.8 million fewer people on welfare, a smaller federal workforce, a smaller federal deficit. "We are on the right track to the 21st Century.... But our work is not finished." He added, "Again, I say, the question is no longer who's to blame, but what to do. I believe that Bob Dole and Jack Kemp, and Ross Perot love our country and they have worked hard to serve it." Then he compared their records but said he would not attack his opponents personally. "Let us build a bridge to help our parents raise their children, to help young people and adults to get the education and training they need, to make our streets safer, to help Americans succeed at home and at work, to break the cycle of poverty and dependence, to protect our environment for generations to come, and to maintain our world leadership for peace and freedom. Let us resolve to build that bridge." His vision was endorsed with loud and repeated applause and shouts.

The youthful and commanding Clinton made his argument in plain, down home Arkansas style, simplifying the complex, offering solutions, and many listeners felt as though he was speaking directly to them, and they nodded their heads in agreement. "I want to build a Bridge to the 21st Century, in which we expand opportunity through education. Where computers are as much a part of the classroom as blackboards.... By the year 2000, the single most critical thing we can do is to give every single American who wants it the chance to go to college. We must make two years of college just as universal as four years of high school education is today, and we can do it....We need schools that will take our children into the next century." He was met

with a standing ovation. The President then outlined other ideas to improve education before going on to his plans to balance the budget "in a way that protects our values...that preserves Medicare, Medicaid, education, the environment, the integrity of our pensions, the strength of our people." He also called for targeted tax cuts, one million jobs for welfare recipients by the year 2000, a safer country with a ban on assault weapons and killer cop bullets, a Victims' Rights Constitutional Amendment, a crackdown on dangerous drugs, gangs, a more supportive and safer environment for children and families, a stronger system of defense, stronger trade and exports, and a safer world through reduction of nuclear arsenals and a ban on poison gases.

He was deadly serious when he almost confidentially shared with listeners that his administration was "fighting terrorism on all fronts.... Just last month, I signed a law imposing harsh sanctions on foreign companies that invest in key sectors of the Iranian and Libyan economies....Terrorists are as big a threat to our future, perhaps bigger, than organized crime." He promised to improve airport security. He bemoaned the wars of Bosnia, the Middle East, Northern Ireland, and Burundi. "We have seen the terrible, terrible price that people pay when they insist on fighting and killing their neighbors over their differences. In our own country, we have seen America pay a terrible price for any form of discrimination, and we have seen us grow stronger as we have steadily let more and more of our hatreds and our fears go."

The President concluded, "My fellow Americans, 68 nights from tonight, the American people will face once again a critical moment of decision....The real choice is whether we will build a bridge to the future or a bridge to the past. About whether we believe our best days are still out there, or our best days are behind us. Let us commit ourselves this night to rise up and build the bridge we know we ought to build all the way to the 21st Century.... My fellow Americans, after these four good, hard years, I still believe in a place called Hope, a place called

America. Thank you. God Bless you, and good night." President Clinton again received a sustained standing ovation for his overview of the complex government he had safely guided, and chants of "For More Years" echoed through the building.

One-hundred-and-fifty-thousand red, white, and blue balloons fluttered down from nets draped across the United Center's ceiling, along with "a blizzard" of colored confetti. A spirit of joyousness prevailed for more than 10 minutes. The hydraulic lectern lowered below the stage. Al Gore came out and joined his hand and raised arm with Clinton's in triumph and friendship. Then the Clinton and the Gore wives, their children, Mayor Daley, and a host of others waved to the audience from the stage and TV cameras zoomed in on their flushed and excited faces. Red, white, and blue State banners and blue Clinton placards were raised and lowered and raised again by the cheering assembly, a colorful sea of excited expressions for the TV cameras to scan as their commentators presented instant analysis of the President's speech and the day's complications before they signed off.

Then the Reverend Dr. Rex Horne Jr., pastor, Emmanuel Baptist Church, Little Rock, Arkansas, Clinton's own pastor, delivered the Benediction. Representative Gephardt pounded his gavel to promptly adjourn the 42nd Quadrennial Convention at 10:21 p.m. as the elated delegates and spectators filed out of the giant sports arena into the warm Chicago August night, headed for more parties, then packing to head back home to launch their local campaigns in support of this national ticket. The Convention Grand Finale Event drew the Vice President and his wife out to the Grand Ballroom on Navy Pier, with music by Los Lobos, Clarence Clemons, and Stephen Stills.

Speech Reaction

The next morning, headlines like those in *The Advertiser*, in Lafayette, Louisiana, were typical across the entire Union. "Clinton: Country 'on right track'." The President received kudos for his laundry list speech, his optimism, and his achievements. But, just below that lead story was another headline that negated the Convention's central message, "Sex scandal claims Clinton campaign aide." That version of the story, which ran in the Hearst newspaper chain across the nation, began, "President Clinton, whose 1992 election campaign overcame allegations of sexual misconduct, draft dodging, and financial hijinks, hit a new bump Thursday when his top political adviser was forced out after being linked to a prostitute." Family First? A few pages later, yet another negative headline piled on when it revealed, "Gore admits getting tobacco farm funds," for his family farm even though he had told the Convention the sad story of his older sister's smoking-related death from lung cancer that brought many delegates to tears.

The *Portland [Maine] Press Herald's* front page headline read, "Clinton claims progress, says 'work is not finished'." The subhead continued, "In his acceptance speech, the president vows to protect poorer Americans and to help middle-class families." But another front page story also announced, "Clinton advisor resigns over sex story." The *Louisville Courier Journal* wrote that the, "Speech showcased Clinton at his moderate best," and added that it was a "rousing spirited speech." A *Chicago Sun-Times* editorial lamented, "Gennifer Flowers. Whitewater. Now Dick Morris. It's always something." And the liberal paper warned that both parties were ignoring "critical questions," such as what to do about "entitlements that consume so much of the federal budget, and which threaten to throw future generations of Americans into bankruptcy." The next week, *Time* magazine observed that both the Republican and Democratic Conventions were anti-ideological "Virtuefests," four days of party regulars devoted to their families set against the American backdrop outside their walls of Gangstra rap and violence.

Washington Post political columnist David Broder called the Democratic Convention a “fantasyland...a magical kingdom where all good things are possible if only the ‘two-headed monster’ (Al Gore’s phrase for Bob Dole and Newt Gingrich) is destroyed....”

The next morning the Clinton/Gore campaign left Chicago on a two-day bus ride to continue that quest “On the Road to the 21st Century” through Illinois, Missouri, Kentucky, and Tennessee. Ultimately, the Convention gave Clinton’s poll numbers little bounce. “We lost an entire news cycle [because of Morris],” one Democrat consultant complained. Not everyone agreed. “I think the Dick Morris story started to die the minute the President took the podium for his Acceptance Speech,” countered Illinois’ leader Dick Durbin. It seemed clear, that although the President had as much as a 30-point poll lead on his opponent and both candidates promised no personal attacks, the campaign was going to have more than a touch of old fashion mud-slinging, no matter what the candidates said. Political Action Committees and media consultants saw to that with their barrage of negative TV attack ads that continued until Election Day in November. A week after the Convention, Clinton launched a real cruise missile attack on Iraq after Saddam Hussein sent troops into an UN-protected zone in Kurdish territory in northern Iraq to kill his opponents. Dole muted his criticism.

Election Results

Day four TV viewership of the 1996 Conventions reached 25.6 million for the Democrats versus 36 million four years earlier in 1992. The numbers were similar for Republicans. Day four viewership for the Dole speech was 25.3 million versus 35.1 million in 1992. Was the public of 300 million-plus people listening? On the campaign trail, Clinton accused Republicans of practicing the "politics of division" while Democrats pursued the President’s "new politics of the common ground." He offered up the bipartisan support for the North American Free Trade

Agreement (NAFTA) as an example. The Clinton campaign played it safe, sounding moderate and progressive at the same time, triangulating issues with well-rehearsed, compassionate rhetoric. Some observers said he was using President Reagan's 1984 re-election playbook as a model for controlling the narrative and keeping his big lead. The stock market was up almost 75 percent during his first term, but the gap between the wealthiest and everyone else continued to grow. "It's been a remarkable period of steady growth, low inflation, and low unemployment," former Federal Reserve Board Chairman Paul A. Volcker told *The New York Times*. People were often charmed by Clinton, they liked him, and the economy was roaring, so why change?

Sixty-seven days later, Bob Dole ended his campaign with a 15-state, 69-hour sprint. He called himself a "Marathon Man" and promised to cut taxes, balance the budget, fight drug abuse, save Medicare, and promote "equal opportunity." His last stop was at the Missouri home of Harry S Truman, symbol of hope for candidates desperate to stage a last minute comeback. In the end, his exhaustive schedule and appeal to stop big government didn't help him. In many ways, the election was over before the campaigning began.

A little more than two months after the Chicago Convention, on Tuesday November 5, 1996, Clinton and Gore were handily re-elected, with Chicago and Illinois delivering valuable votes. The Clinton/Gore ticket scored a resounding victory with 47,401,185 votes, sweeping 31 States and the District of Columbia. The Dole/Kemp ticket drew a total of 39,197,469 popular votes, 40.7 percent of the total, with victories in only 19 States. Yet the expensive Conventions and all the high-energy campaigning only inspired complacency. Just 51.7 percent of eligible voters turned up at the polls, the lowest turnout since Calvin Coolidge won in 1924. None-the-less, Clinton tallied a landslide in the Electoral College with 379 Electoral Votes to Dole's 159.

However, President Clinton's 49.2 percent of the popular vote meant that, technically, he remained a "minority President." In 1992, Clinton mustered only 43 percent of the popular vote.

In both elections, entrepreneur and Independent, Reform Party candidate Ross Perot was an annoying factor. In 1992, Perot garnered 18.9 percent of the popular vote. That was enough, observers said, to deny President George Herbert Walker Bush his re-election. Bush only won 37.5 percent of the vote. In 1996, Perot still tallied 8.4 percent of the popular vote. But President Clinton was handily re-elected. Both parties spent half a billion dollars on their way to the polls.

In the House of Representatives, Democrats picked up three seats. But Republicans maintained a 237 to 208 majority. In the Senate, Republicans added two seats, for a 53 to 45 advantage. Thus, Clinton continued to face a tough path for passing legislation on the issues he celebrated at the Convention. President Clinton had assured voters that his administration would "Build a Bridge to the 21st Century." Republicans charged that it would be a "Bridge to Nowhere." However, history records that the bridge actually led to a world of persistent terrorism, decades-long wars in the Middle East and even in Europe, recession and partial economic collapse, and worldwide pandemic, not that these were caused by any specific policies. Yet, the new Century also witnessed growth of the Internet and a digital revolution that ushered in massive social transformation, dislocation, and creativity, reshaping of the world economy, providing global opportunity for some and shutting out others.

In August, Clinton commented, "I don't think the Republicans can damage my character.... They can attack my reputation, but not my character." In the end, Clinton's own reckless behavior managed to do that. Instead of a triumphant second term, President Clinton suffered a self-induced humiliation and collapse of his hopeful agenda that was only partially revived 12 years later by Chicagoan Barack Obama's surprise and optimistic election as President. In the end, even critics agree that during his public years Clinton was basically a good man with big dreams. He was the most talented politician of his generation, a powerful orator, a

sophisticated and compassionate policy expert, who united his party, South and North, East and West to take the presidency and its power away from Republicans for the first time in more than a decade.

But President Clinton suffered human flaws whose excesses should have been controlled earlier in his career, or he should have been sidetracked before he felt compelled to lie to the American public and a Grand Jury. (His hero JFK got away with sexual casualness. But the post-Watergate world no longer tolerated secretive behavior from public officials, sexual or otherwise, although that changed again with Donald Trump. Clinton's aberrant behavior aided that tolerance.) Bill Clinton was in politics, in part, because it put him in a position to do good for ordinary people and his country. And, it can't be denied that he did plenty of good. But his private salacious actions and the resulting scandal did incalculable harm to the body politic, degrading public discourse and further undermining public trust and admiration for its President. Ultimately, Bill Clinton was an American tragedy. He had enormous talent, great charm, immense power, grand aspirations, but he was felled by his own weaknesses and an opponent ready to pounce on them. If you are a Democrat, you think he was unjustly pillared and impeached for private behavior. If you are Republican, you believe he reaped what he sowed. But, there is little debate that the nation both gained and suffered during the Clinton years.

One can only speculate about how, in the wake of this scandal that monopolized the news and public attention for months, U.S. history would have been different if President Clinton simply would have honorably resigned for the good of the country and turned the presidency over to his Vice President. Al Gore then would have been an incumbent running for President in 2000. Would the Democrats have lost that year in a razor thin, disputed election? Would the United States have been seduced into a disastrous, two-decade war in the Middle East and

Afghanistan after the devastating attacks of 9/11? Would the “Great Recession” have crippled the world economy? Would Barack Obama have succeeded President George W. Bush? Of course, hypothetical alternative histories are fascinating, but only fantasies. Bill Clinton finished his second term, was partially vindicated by a mid-term Democratic election victory, and the nation rushed forward across the bridge into a perilous 21st Century.

R. Craig Sautter
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(Sautter also is author of *Philadelphia Presidential Conventions (1848-2000)* and *New York Presidential Conventions: The Pre-TV Era, 1839-1924*. In 1968, he was an anti-Viet Nam war and Civil Rights protestor on the corner of Michigan & Balbo on that tumultuous August evening of the nominations.)